DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 765 CS 209 809

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TITLE A Base-Line Study on the Use of Outside Database, Full Text Retrieval Systems by Newspaper Editorial Page Writers.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Databases; *Editorials; Information Services; *Information Sources; Journalism; *Newspapers; Occupational Surveys; *Online Searching; Research Tools; Special Libraries; User Satisfaction (Information); *Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Journalism Research

ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that editorial page writers do not have what they consider sufficient time to adequately research their topics, a study surveyed newspaper librarians and writers to determine the extent of database system use by editorial page writers. Circulations of the participating newspapers were included as a variable to determine if newspaper size had any bearing on the responses. The survey sample consisted of 40 editorial page writers representing 27 newspapers and 24 libraries. Among the findings were the following: (1) 29 writers agreed or strongly agreed that lack of time to do an adequate job of research was their biggest problem; (2) with the larger newspapers, the time problem was less severe; (3) the majority of writers did not use the computer database retrieval systems in most of their research; and (4) writers at newspapers where librarians serve as mediators were more satisfied with the database retrieval systems than were writers at newspapers where mediators were not available. (HOD)

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A BASE-LINE STUDY ON THE USE OF OUTSIDE DATABASE, FULL TEXT RETRIEVAL SYSTEMS BY NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL PAGE WRITERS

by

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Paper presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, Norman, Oklahoma, August 1986.

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This paper is based on the first author's master's thesis completed at Iowa State University. The authors thank former department chair J.K. Hvistendahl for financial assistance in the study.

CS 209 809

A BASE-LINE STUDY ON THE USE OF OUTSIDE DATABASE, FULL TEXT RETRIEVAL SYSTEMS BY NEWSPAPER EDITORIAL PAGE WRITERS

Introduction

Shortage of time historically has been the bane of the newspaper editorial page writer. Curtis MacDougall, who claimed he had listened to more editorial-page critiques than "any man alive," told the 1974 convention of the National Conference of Editorial Writers (NCEW) that the most common complaint in the history of the NCEW was the scarcity of time and resources to do a proper job of gathering information and gaining perspective on editorial topics. "And when writers don't do research," he said, "they are inclined to become biased."[1]

Insufficient research can lead to other problems, such as ignorance of the topic.[2] The most obvious symptom of ignorance is "waffling" or "writing around" the topic. An editorial writer for an 80,000-circulation suburban Chicago newspaper explained:

> You don't want to tackle something when you're not sure what you're talking about, but sometimes you have to anyway. So what I do is to just kind of write around those topics. . . skirt the issue.[3]

Similar concerns have been expressed by editorial writers for larger papers. A writer for a large southern California daily noted:

> You have to do a quick study, and in a couple of hours it's tough to feel like you're prepared to express an opinion. It's not like a reporter going out and gathering information, because the reporter can say "so and so said this," or "so and so said that." An editorial writer needs to understand the subject before taking a position.[4]

It is a problem that has become more severe as American society has become more complex and difficult to keep up with. A 1974 survey of

editorial writers showed that nearly all had trouble staying in close touch with events.[5] A former associate editor for the Chicago Daily News summed up the situation:

> The problem is trying to know enough to make a little sense when discussing today's fantastically complicated and multi-sided issues. Besides -- worse luck -- things change at a great rate, and an authority on a subject today can be a dunce tomorrow, unless he works like a fury to keep hep.[6]

Until the late 1970s, editorial writers were left to deal with the combined problems of limited time and complex issues either by badgering management to hire more editorial writers or simply resigning themselves to doing the best job they could under their limiting circumstances.[7] Beyond their time constraints, many were limited by their libraries that varied in quality of service and quantity of reference materials from haphazardly filed packets of yellowing clippings to modern, well-stocked information centers.[8] In general, information searches were time consuming and frequently unproductive.[9]

However, since about 1979, full text database storage and retrieval systems have made it possible for subscribing newspapers to have access to a broad range of current information in a matter of minutes. Unlike the systems that produce bibliographies and abstracts, the full text search and retrieval systems enable users to zero in on their specific information needs. For example, by selecting the appropriate "keywords," users can extract specific passages and exact quotes from lengthy texts in a matter of seconds. In short, the systems are high-speed information machines -- devices that have the potential to solve the editorial page writers' problems of too little time to research complex topics.

Apparently the systems have begun to ease the problems, at least

from the point of view of the newspaper library staff. In 1985, the library director of Long Island Newsday reported that computer database systems had made substantial contributions to the overall efficiency and quality of the newspaper "because of the broader range of information and the greater speed at which we can deliver it."[10] Before the systems were installed, the library consisted of files of Newsday clippings, a few newspapers and magazines, an encyclopedia, some indexes and almanacs, and other standard reference books available in most major newspaper libraries. The library director noted that:

> As reference sources for working newspapers, these materials have some serious weaknesses. Moreover, there's something incestuous about reporters relying on their own newspaper's clips to research a story. Information in clips is limited to what people at a particular paper already know about the subject. When a reporter is assigned a story unrelated to anything his or her paper has covered before, the clipping file is useless as a research source. Add to this the fact that printed indexes are always a couple of months behind and that encyclopedias and almanacs are updated only once a year -- they're just not a lot of help in covering a breaking story.[11]

The library director said that since the system has been in operation at Newsday, the number of queries the library can respond to has quadrupled. He added that the quality of answers and the complexity of the topics that the library can handle have also improved.

Literature Review

A search of the research literature produced only one article dealing directly with the use of computer database storage and retrieval systems by newspaper editorial writers.

A 1984 survey of 21 dailies generally supported the optimistic view that computer database systems do provide broader, more efficient information searches than do manual procedures. However, it was also

found that enthusiasm for the systems was not uniformly distributed throughout the newsroom. For the purposes of this study, of greatest interest was the use by editorial writers. Only 10 of the 21 responding newspapers had used the systems to gather information for editorials or columns, compared with 16 that used the systems for in-depth articles. Respondents were asked to rank six types of articles according to how often database information was sought, using a six-point scale, with one being most often. Editorials and columns ranked last (4.67), following in-depth articles (1.50), investigative articles (2.67), spot news (3.25), features (3.33), and analyses (3.80).[12]

While no other reports dealing with newspaper database use were found in the research literature, results that appear pertinent to this study have been reported from research in other areas. In particular, the research in other areas strongly supports the notion that database retrieval systems work best when the ultimate user of the information is assisted by a trained specialist.

For example, a Federal Judicial Center study investigating the use of the Lexis and Westlaw legal information retrieval systems found that only 30 percent of the attorneys preferred to conduct searches without help. In addition, of those who preferred to their searches alone, 50 percent preferred to have a specialist available during their searches.[13]

A study by Williams and Curtis supported the finding that mediators can be an important factor in the use of the systems. Their study looked at use of the Lockheed DIALOG Information Retrieval System, a library type database, by 38 test subjects recruited from an English university. The study showed that 95 percent of the participants were

partially or fully satisfied with the results they obtained by working alone. In somewhat contradictory findings, however, 90 percent of the participants said that they preferred to work with a trained mediator because the results were better and the cost was lower.[14]

An Exxon Company study of retrieval systems investigated use by a group of analytical chemists before they were trained to use the systems, immediately after training, and again six weeks and a year after training. The study was designed as a pilot project to determine the effectiveness of training employees to conduct their own searches of databases related to their work. Eighteen chemists signed up for the project but only eight completed the three-session, two-week program. Of the eight who completed training, only three were conducting computer searches at the end of one year. The three who continued to use the systems conducted fewer than 10 searches during the year following training. Although the idea of the project was to train employees to use the systems on their own, those who monitored the program expressed some consternation at the inability of the subjects to complete the most basic tasks. In fact, the study design had to be modified to provide more mediator assistance to the subjects. Consistent with the findings of other studies, some of the chemists who were not personally using the systems continued to use them by enlisting the help of others.[15]

Methodology

Two problems with the preceding literature review are obvious. First, very little research is available on the use of database systems by individuals. Second, the studies that have been reported deal with very small numbers of subjects. The reasons for these problems are

equally obvious. The available research, this study included, provides essentially base-line information to be expanded upon later as this now juvenile form of communication becomes more established and matures. However, as sketchy as information is in this area, the literature does provide some basis for expectations.

Hypotheses

The basic assumption of this study is that editorial page writers do not have what they consider sufficient time to adequately research their topics. Since at least the anecdotal literature supports this view, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 1:

A majority of the editorial page writers consider lack of time their most serious problem.

Despite the expectations of Hypothesis 1, and the potential for alleviating the time problem by high-speed, database retrieval systems, the literature indicates that, at this early stage in the history of the systems, the editorial writers will not be using them very much. The results of Endres' study in particular indicate that use by these writers should not be very high.[16] Therefore, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 2:

The majority of editorial page writers do not use the computer database retrieval systems in most of their research.

While use of database retrieval systems by the ultimate users of the information in general has not been very high, a consistent

exception in other fields has been when trained mediators or facilitators have been available to help the information seekers with searches. Since newspapers have librarians who, if adequately trained in manipulating the systems, can serve as mediators, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 3:

Editorial page writers at newspapers where librarians serve as mediators are more satisfied with the database retrieval systems than are writers at newspapers where mediators are not available.

Operationalizations

Since the goal of this study was to determine the extent of database system use by editorial page writers, it was necessary to gather information both from newspaper librarians and writers. Information from librarians was considered necessary since it was suspected that, because of search procedures at the newspapers, they might know more about writers' use of the systems than would the writers. A mail survey of librarians was therefore used to crosscheck information gathered from the writers. Information from the editorial writers was gathered through a telephone survey. Both surveys were conducted during June and July 1985.

Is time a problem for editorial page writers?

To determine if lack of time was a serious problem, as posited in Hypothesis 1, editorial page writers were asked to respond, on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to the statement:

"The biggest single problem facing editorial writers is the lack of time to do an adequate job of research."

The statement was embedded in a list with nine others.

Do editorial page writers use the systems?

To test Hypothesis 2, the extent of system use by editorial writers was determined partially by asking if they:

-- Use for all or most topics

-- Use for some topics

-- Seldom use

-- Never use of don't know

To put the above responses in some context relative to the volume of topics addressed on the systems, writers also were asked:

"In any given week, about how many of your editorial topics lead to a database search?"

Since it was suspected that some writers might query their librarian, who would then conduct the search without the writers knowing how it was conducted, the results were crosschecked with the librarians. Librarians at the subject newspapers were given the names of their newspapers' editorial writers who were part of the sample, and asked how many searches the librarians performed for each writer in any given week.

Is the presence of mediators related to system use and satisfaction?

To address Hypothesis 3, whether writers were more satisfied with the systems at newspapers where librarians serve as mediators, a series of questions was required. First, to determine who conducted the

searches, writers were asked to choose one of the following to describe the database system search procedure at their papers:

-- Use it myself

-- Librarian does the search

-- Work with librarian or other staff member

-- Don't use the system

Second, to determine how effective the writers felt their newspapers' search procedures were, the writers were asked:

"Overall, how satisfied would you say you are with the database system? Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied or disappointed with the system?"

Finally, as another indicator of how helpful the mediators were, writers were asked to respond to another of the Likert scaled statements that read:

"I'd use the system a lot more if I didn't have to go through a librarian."

System use related to newspaper size

To add an extra dimension to the study, circulations of the participating newspapers were included as a variable to determine if newspaper size had any bearing on the responses.

Sample

The first step in selecting a sample of subjects was to develop a list of the newspapers in the United States and Canada that had database retrieval systems. Part of the list was provided by the Newspaper Division of the Special Libraries Association. The association had

identified 39 subscriber-papers for the Commercial Database Survey conducted in 1984. Another 12 newspapers with systems were identified by combing through newsletters published by database suppliers and by scanning newspaper and communication-oriented trade journals such as Online, Publisher's Auxiliary and Editor & Publisher. Table 1 shows the number of each type of system in use and the years they were installed at the newspapers.

After the newspapers using database retrieval systems were identified, names of editorial page writers working for the papers were gathered from the Editor & Publisher International Year Book and through telephone calls to the papers that did not list writers' names in the yearbook. The completed list totalled 210 writers. A table of random numbers was used to select 50 names for the study. While an n of 104 would have been necessary to produce a 95 percent confidence level, funding for the study was limited and interview expenses had to be kept to a minimum.

The sampling method resulted in the selection of writers from 37 of the 51 newspapers having database retrieval systems in the United States and Canada. None of the writers selected were from the Canadian papers. The list of the 37 newspapers represented in the writer survey also became, in essence, the list of newspaper libraries to survey.

Because of attrition in the surveying process, the final, usable sample was reduced to 40 editorial page writers, representing 27 newspapers, and 24 libraries. Table 2 presents the distribution for both newspapers and writers by circulation group.

Results

Because of the small sample employed in this study, analysis of the

data by some of the more sophisticated statistical methods would in some cases undoubtedly yield misleading conclusions. Consequently, the tables that present data for testing the hypotheses rely solely on crosstabulations.

Is time a problem for editorial page writers?

Table 3 presents the data to test the first hypothesis, concerning the severity of the time problem faced by editorial page writers. The results show that 29 of the 40 writers (72.5 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that "lack of time to do an adequate job of research" was their biggest problem. The data therefore do support the hypothesis that stated:

Hypothesis 1:

A majority of the editorial page writers consider lack of time their most serious problem.

Perhaps more interesting than the mere numbers of writers agreeing or disagreeing with the statement on lack of time is the distribution of responses over the circulation categories. Apparently, the larger the newspaper, the less severe is the time problem. This may be an indication of the additional duties often heaped on editorial page writers at smaller papers.

Do editorial page writers use the systems?

Tables 4 and 5 provide the information needed to test the second hypothesis that addresses the extent of database system use by editorial page writers. Table 4 indicates that only two of the respondents (5.0 percent) used the systems for most or all of the topics

they covered. Also, only 13 writers (32.5 percent) used the systems for some, most or all of their topics. Judging from the results reported in Table 5, even this meager amount of system use has to be considered a gross overestimate in all but the newspapers with circulations of 500,000 or more. Table 5 indicates that, at most of the newspapers, writers believed they were using the systems much more than the librarians said they were. Only on the largest newspapers did librarians report more searches than did the writers. These results appear to confirm the suspicion that search procedures in force at some newspapers may prevent writers from knowing how much they are actually using they systems.

The results do support the hypothesis that stated:

Hypothesis 2:

The majority of editorial page writers do not use the computer database retrieval systems in most of their research.

Is the presence of mediators related to system use and satisfaction?

Tables 6 and 7 present the data needed to determine if librarian-mediators contribute to the use of the systems by editorial page writers. However, it is important to note that some of the results in these tables undoubtedly are contaminated because of the inability of writers to accurately determine how their searches are being conducted when a mediator is involved, as illustrated in Table 5. Specifically, in Table 6 the responses in the category "Librarian conducts searches" should be viewed with suspicion because it is unclear if the librarians conducted the searches using the database systems or some other methods. The results in this category may in fact be more a measurement of the

overall satisfaction with the librarian's work.

With that caveat in mind, Table 6 shows that in general all methods of database searching resulted in somewhat or very satisfying results. Among those subjects who responded that they were "very satisfied" with the results, the highest percentage were from those newspapers where the librarians either conducted the searches or helped the writers conduct the searches. However, Table 7 indicates only marginal support for the librarian-mediator. Of the writers who had experience working with librarians on database searches, 52.6 percent disagreed with the statement:

"I'd use the system more often if I didn't have to go through a librarian."

By comparison, 42.1 percent of the respondents indicated that they would use the systems more often if they were not required to work through a librarian. The evidence, while not overwhelming, nonetheless does tend to support the hypothesis that stated:

Hypothesis 3:

Editorial page writers at newspapers where librarians serve as mediators are more satisfied with the database retrieval systems than are writers at newspapers where mediators are not available.

Discussion

It is evident from the results that database retrieval systems thus far have done little to relieve the time-shortage problems suffered by editorial page writers. Furthermore, it appears that the presence of mediators to help writers conduct searches has not had much effect.

Perhaps the important questions at this point are: 1) Why aren't

the systems being used more, and; 2) Is there anything that can be done to help promote more widespread use of the systems in the future?

Some insight into the first question can be gathered from comments offered by editorial page writers during the telephone interviews. For example, some writers indicated that the new systems were not an acceptable substitute for manual methods. Clearly, the database retrieval systems were not meeting the needs of these writers. Their comments included:

> Database printouts are too unwieldy, I prefer the clips.
>
> I'm just more comfortable using my own newspaper's clips. I like to spread them out and see them all at the same time.
>
> I'm a better researcher than the library staff. I don't like to wait for information and I don't want to rely on their judgment of what's useful.
>
> Sometimes you give the library a request for background information and they may give you 20 to 30 stories. That's too much.

Other problems appear to be the result of the procedures for using the systems. At many papers the cost of database searches was charged to the library budget rather than to the news department that requested the information. As a consequence, some librarians were loath to conduct database searches unless absolutely necessary. An extreme example encountered during the study concerned a writer who said there were no such systems at his newspaper, when in fact some had been in operation there since 1979. The librarian for the paper explained that she didn't make existence of the systems known to the writers for fear that requests would bankrupt her budget.

In addition to the economic problem of having the database systems' budget being charged to the library, according to some librarians there

was the logistical problem of having access to the systems also confined to the library. Seventy percent of the writers in this study said that the systems could only be accessed in the library. One librarian said that the location of the systems did affect use by editorial writers.

> This is a difficult group to help (editorial writers). The further they are from sources (databases), the less likely they are to use them. If they could access databases from their desks, they would use them more.

One additional hindrance to system use mentioned by the writers apparently reflected inadequacy in the training they received. Only 18 of the 40 writers surveyed said they received any training, and only half of those who had received training considered it adequate. Several of the respondents made comments similar to these:

> I had the training, but I still have limited personal knowledge of the system. The library does most of the work for me.

> My only frustration is that I'm not using it to its full potential. I feel like I've got this high-powered sports car, but I'm not driving it as fast as it can go.

> I call the library and ask them to do it for me. But with a refresher course, I could do it myself.

Conclusions

Perhaps the results of this study are best summed up by Yarbrough, who in 1983 warned against being overly optimistic when considering the future of computer information technologies.

> It is easy to become enamored of the technical possibilities of the systems and the sweeping assertions of some of their proponents. In the process we tend to ignore such mundane considerations as economics, institutional constraints, and the audience needs and abilities. These constraints will serve to limit the speed of diffusion of new information technologies. They will also modify the systems which eventually are accepted. Only some of the technological possibilities will be realized.[17]

Yarbrough's words harken back to the second question posed at the

beginning of the discussion: Is there anything that can be done to help promote more widespread use of the systems in the future? The findings in this study indicate that the answer is a qualified "probably."

Assuming that one of the intentions in installing database retrieval systems at newspapers is to make information searches more complete and more efficient, the first step should be to design systems that produce results at least as satisfactory as the writers' present research methods. The evidence indicates that many writers will not use the systems unless newspaper management and system vendors provide systems that meet research needs.

The second step should be to remove as many obstacles as possible from the research process. In this regard, the study points to two specific recommendations. First, writers must receive better training in order to make efficient use of the systems and to learn how the systems can best serve the writers' needs. Second, writers must be given easy access to the systems so that they have the opportunity to make the systems a routine part of their jobs. If the problem is that librarians are preventing database searches in order to protect their budgets, procedures should be changed to make the editorial departments responsible for the costs. If the problem is that writers do not have convenient access to the systems, outlets should be provided at their desks or other places more accessible than the library.

Footnotes

[1]Lenora Williamson, "Critics Suggest Ways to Improve Editorials," Editor & Publisher, March 9, 1974, p. 13.

[2]Curtis D. MacDougall, Principles of Editorial Writing (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Co., 1973), p. 109.

[3]Fred Krecker, personal interview, April 1985.

[4]Tom Grey, personal interview, April 1985.

[5]Robert Weston, "An Inward Look," Editor & Publisher, November 2, 1974, p. 14.

[6]Kenneth McArdle, "Real Pressure is to Make Sense," The Masthead, 30:69 (1978).

[7]Herbert Brucker, "Newspapers Need Prophet Motive," The Masthead, 30:16 (1978).

[8]Gretchen Schmidhausler, "Electronic Libraries," APME Red Book of 1982 (New York: Associated Press, 1983), p. 216.

[9]Homer T. Pyle, "Why Editorial Writers Must Do Some of Their Own Reporting," The Bulletin, September 1983, p. 7.

[10]Andrew Ippolito, "Databases in Newspaper Libraries," Editor & Publisher, May 11, 1985, p. 60e.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Fredric F. Endres, "Daily Newspaper Utilization of Computer Data Bases," Newspaper Research Journal, 7:32-33 (1985).

[13]Joseph L. Ebersole, "The Emergence of Computer-Assisted Research as an Established Legal Tool," in Legal and Legislative Information Processing, Beth Krevitt Eres, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 129.

[14]P.W. Williams and J.M. Curtis, "The Use of On-line Information Retrieval Services," Program, 11:1-9 (1977).

[15]Kenneth Walton and Patricia Dedert, "Experiences at Exxon in Training End-Users to Search Technical Databases Online," Online, September 1983, pp. 42-50.

[16]Endres, "Daily Newspaper Utilization of Computer Data Bases," pp. 29-35.

[17]Paul Yarbrough and Clifford Scherer, "Computer Research Literature: Where to Find It and a State-of-Art Assessment," Proceedings of NCR-90 Research Conference: Application of Computer Technology to Communication Processes, Chicago, 1984.

Table 1. Number of newspapers having specified systems according to the years they were installed.

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	
Nexis	0	1	1	1	1	6	4	0	= 14
Dialog	2	1	1	2	1	4	2	1	= 14
Vu/Text	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	2	= 10
Dow Jones	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	= 6
New York Times Information Bank	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	= 3
Datatimes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	= 2
Washington Alert Service	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	= 1
I.P. Sharp	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	= 1

Table 2. Percentage and number of newspaper and writer participants, by circulation category.

	25,000-50,000	50,001-100,000	100,001-250,000	250,001-500,000	500,000 or more	Total %
Newspapers in survey n=27	11.1% (3)	7.4% (2)	55.5% (15)	14.9% (4)	11.1% (3)	= 100%
Writers in survey n=40	7.5% (3)	5.0% (2)	57.5% (23)	12.5% (5)	17.5% (7)	= 100%

Table 3. Percentage and number of responses by circulation category to attitude statement: "The biggest single problem facing editorial writers is the lack of time to do an adequate job of research."

	25,000-50,000	50,001-100,000	100,001-250,000	250,001-500,000	500,000 or more
Agree or strongly agree n=29	100.0% (3)	100.0% (2)	73.9% (17)	60.0% (3)	57.1% (4)
Disagree or strongly disagree n=11	0%	0%	26.1% (6)	40.0% (2)	42.9% (3)
Total %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4. Percentage and number of responses on the extent of use of systems, by circulation category.

	25,000-50,000	50,001-100,000	100,001-250,000	250,001-500,000	500,000 or more
Use for all or most topics n=2	0%	0%	8.7% (2)	0%	0%
Use for some topics n=11	33.3% (1)	0%	30.4% (7)	20.0% (1)	28.6% (2)
Seldom use n=16	66.7% (2)	0%	34.8% (8)	60.0% (3)	42.9% (3)
Never use or don't know n=11	0%	100.0% (2)	26.1% (6)	20.0% (1)	28.6% (2)
Total %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5. Comparison of the mean number of database searches per week reported by editorial page writers and librarians, by circulation categories.

	25,000 50,000	50,001- 100,000	100,001- 250,000	250,001- 500,000	500,000 or more
Reported by writers n=15	3.0	0	2.0	2.13	1.0
Reported by librarians n=15	0	0	.44	.13	4.0

Table 6. Writers' satisfaction with database systems as a function of mediator involvement.

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not very satisfied	Disappointed	Total %
Searches conducted as cooperative venture n=7	28.6% (2)	57.1% (4)	14.3% (1)	0%	= 100%
End-user conducts searches n=9	22.2% (2)	77.8% (7)	0%	0%	= 100%
Librarian conducts searches n=12	41.7% (5)	33.3% (4)	16.7% (2)	8.3% (1)	= 100%

Table 7. Responses by writers who work with librarian-mediators, to attitude statement: "I'd use the system more often if I didn't have to go through a librarian." (n=19)

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total %
10.5%	31.6%	5.3%	52.6%	0%	= 100%